

In the last few years, lots of my friends have built wine cellars in their homes, including me. George Feith, a local carpenter, built most of them. The most beautiful ones were tens of thousands of dollars. One local collector spent over \$100,000. If you've been to Napa, you may have seen wineries that have spent millions on wine storage.

I started out with wine in a wet-air conditioned basement much like the cellars in Europe. Since air conditioning is a relatively new invention, most people have used my method for hundreds of years. However, I am always asked questions about my cellar (30,000 bottles at one point). Here are some of those questions and my answers. I hope it helps.

What should you build your cellar out of? Without a doubt, natural redwood is best. However, any unfinished wood will work. There is always a danger that finished wood will impart the odors of the finish into the wine. If you can't smell the finish, then you're probably ok. Limestone or cork is good for the floor. I recently used cork and it's saved some bottles I've dropped. If you use limestone, seal it. Otherwise it will stain when you drop your bottle.

What kind of shelving should you use? I like large square or diamond bins. You can also use pre-manufactured storage. If you have big bottles, you can customize large bins for both storage and display. I would never do double-deep bins. I've done it, lived with it for ten years and hated it. You need to be able to see your wine. The advantage of big square bins is you can store all shapes and sizes of bottles. Individual racks, one for each bottle, are the safest but reduce overall storage space and also are more expensive. Another choice I've seen but never used are coves. They are long shallow shelves that have scooped-out bottoms that prevent bottles from rolling and hold all size bottles. They also let you showcase special bottles.

How do you store cases of wine? One way is simply to stack them up – that's how the wineries do it. However, I like the sliding racks built for each case that work like a drawer. You can pull them out and get wine one bottle at a time. I put these in my new cellar and I love them. There are rollers that make it easy to handle heavy cases of wine. Remember, cases come in all sizes so one drawer size doesn't fit all cases. Also, lots of people use these drawers only on the lowest level of their cellar wall.

The reason collectors store wine in original cases instead of unpacking them is because the auction market values unopened cases the highest. Also, why unpack if you're not drinking it for a few years? Remember, however, empty cases are worthless.

What is the best temperature and humidity for storing wine? The general rule is 55° and 70% humidity. I keep my best wines in a cellar at 53° and 90% humidity. Humidity makes the corks stay healthy and that keeps the wine from getting oxidized. The temperature affects aging – the colder the cellar, the slower the aging. Wine nerds like me can argue about two or three degrees of temperature or a 10% variation in humidity for hours. If you're close, most wine will be protected for aging. Special insulation is required if you're using high humidity. Your builder should know.

Should I put a table in my cellar for dinner parties? I say, "No!" Who wants to eat in 55° and 80% humidity? Plus wine doesn't like light so unless you eat in the dark, the cellar is not the place for dinner. A table close to the cellar or just outside is a good idea, but in the cellar probably doesn't make sense.

What is the best inventory system? There are lots of them and they're my friends so I won't mention any names. I use an Excel spreadsheet and have for 13 years. I find it's easy. I put wine, vintage, price, bin# and other info on my inventory. The hottest new systems are bar coded. They give you perfect control over inventory and perfect records for planning dinners, donations, or for insurance purposes.

So if you don't have a wine cellar, use a cool, damp place. If it's not damp, then at least dark and cool. Not the refrigerator – it dries out the cork. There are also units you can buy to store from 50 to 1500 bottles. They're self-contained and you can put them in the garage. Whatever you choose will work. Just know wine hates heat, light, and dry conditions.

Here's a final thought from G.K. Chesterton. "The dipsomaniac and the abstainer both make the same mistake: They regard wine as a drug and not a drink."